

By Brett Pawlowski

WorkReady Philadelphia: Preparing Youth for Job Readiness

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ONE OF THE GREAT CONCERNS OF THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

involves the workforce pipeline: employers want to be sure that new entries into the labor pool, whether from the K-12 or postsecondary systems, are prepared for the jobs that await them. In Philadelphia, business and community leaders have begun working together to make sure high school students are exposed to the workplace and have an opportunity to acquire the skills they need to succeed after school.

Origins of WorkReady Philadelphia

Since its founding 10 years ago, the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board (PWIB) has worked to align the skills of the region's labor force across age levels to meet the needs of employers in the area. PWIB realized early on that youth—the future workforce—would be a critically important target population, and therefore launched the Youth Council to find ways of improving youth outcomes and workforce preparedness.

As the Youth Council considered options for better preparing Philadelphia youth for the workforce, they acknowledged that schools, particularly urban schools with a high-poverty population could not be expected to create skilled future employees on their own. They explored the growing body of research that suggests that low-income, high-risk teens who have opportunities to gain work experience and to connect education and work during high school are likely to do better in school and earn more throughout their lifetimes. And they realized that

opportunities for work and work experience are far less available to youth in urban neighborhoods than to those who live in more affluent suburbs.

The PWIB Youth Council therefore designed a multifaceted program called WorkReady Philadelphia to help area youth, ages 14 to 21, gain direct exposure to the world of work and develop the skills needed to thrive in the workplace. They enlisted the Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN), an intermediary organization that works with several constituencies in the Philadelphia market, to administer the program on their behalf.

A Suite of Solutions

WorkReady Philadelphia has several components, each of which utilizes a different approach in order to improve the preparedness of students for the workforce. Some of these involve directly connecting students and employers in the workplace, while others concentrate on developing the infrastructure needed to prepare students, from teacher training to building awareness of careers among the entire targeted population.

WorkReady Philadelphia asks its business partners to support workforce development of youth in several ways, including:

- Allow area youth to visit businesses in the area and shadow employees as they work.
- Establish mentorships between employees and teens.
- Provide internships to teens in the program.
- Meet current workforce needs by



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hiring youth for part-time or full-time jobs.

- Participate in industry pipeline programs by engaging and recruiting future workers.
- Present at workshops, such as career awareness and job-readiness programs at schools, youth centers and industry fairs.
- Provide a financial contribution through the Youth Wage Fund.
- Support education reform through curriculum and policy development.
- Provide teacher externships, exposing them to industry trends and expectations through the Educator in the Workplace program.

WorkReady Philadelphia runs all of these programs with a \$12 million budget, with support coming from public, private and foundation investments. As a result,

they are able to place more than 10,000 young people in high-quality programs that incorporate work experience, academic enrichment and college exposure. As an intermediary organization, PYN does not manage this operation single-handedly; instead, it works with dozens of selected local youth serving organizations who operate these programs on their behalf.

The Summer Youth Program

One of the largest-scale programs managed by WorkReady Philadelphia is the Summer Youth Program which was launched in 2003. In 2009 it worked with 8,800 area youth through various partner agencies to prepare them in some way for the work world. PYN places participating students into programs based on their level of preparedness. Program options include:

- **Summer Internships** provide older youth the opportunity to gain work experience, career exposure and learn specialized skills with an employer. Youth are employed for a total of 120 hours—20 hours per week for six weeks.
- **Work Experience** programs combine employment at a nonprofit or public sector agency with academic enrichment during the summer.
- **Academic Support** programs focus on developing academic skills while providing exposure to higher education and career options.
- **Service Learning** program participants work in teams to develop projects that incorporate active community service as well as academic enrichment during the summer.
- Participants in WorkReady Philadelphia's **Year-Round** programs,

WorkReady Philadelphia

Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN), Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board, area employers (for-profit and nonprofit), charities, government agencies.

Challenge:

Ensure that urban youth in the Philadelphia area are prepared to enter the local workforce.

Solution:

Working with the support of local businesses, foundations, nonprofits and government agencies, PYN manages a stable of academic

improvement, career awareness, and workforce readiness programs, operating through a stable of partner agencies to do so. Depending on students' capabilities and needs, these programs may focus primarily on academics; a combination of academics, career/college awareness, and service learning; or primarily on hands-on internship work.

Partner Roles:

PYN receives assistance from the local business community, with more than 100 providing internship opportunities and many more

providing funding or participating in programs. It also receives support from area charities, nonprofits and from government agencies. In terms of implementation, PYN works with dozens of agencies to manage its programs.

Outcomes:

PYN supports close to 9,000 students in the Philadelphia area, and receives high marks from students and employers alike. They also report strong anecdotal data indicating numerous successes. **I**

which focus on educational success and workforce development, also complete academic projects over the summer.

Students in each of these programs are required to prepare projects or portfolios that document mastery of academic and 21st century skills; in some cases, these projects have the potential to earn high school credit. While students involved in internships spend the bulk of their time on site, they participate in learning sessions, with an initial training and a weekly full-day session in which they reflect on their experiences and further develop workplace skills.

PYN has spent a great deal of time cultivating the business and community relationships needed to offer students such opportunities. According to Melissa Orner, senior vice president of communications and development for PYN, "When we started out in 2003, we didn't have a base of business support; however, because this program was created by the Youth Council of PWIB, we had access to businesspeople and were fortunate that the chair of the Youth Council acted as our local business champion. A few years later, one of our longstanding supporters

became chair of the Chamber and made youth preparedness a priority, which helped as well. Since then, we've seen significant growth in support from both business and political leaders in the city."

Orner also notes that while the economic decline has put pressure on their ability to secure internships and fund programs, they have been able to tap into funds from the federal Stimulus Act, which funded 2,500 youth jobs this year, with an emphasis on "green" positions.

Outcomes

Despite a very different economic environment from previous years, WorkReady Philadelphia served a large student population, with numbers close to their record set in 2008. Highlights from 2009 include:

- Approximate number of youth participating in WorkReady programming totals 8,800.
- 109 summer programs offered through 46 youth-serving organizations.
- Approximately 1,000 summer internships hosted by more than 120 employers.

WorkReady Philadelphia tracks program activity, surveys employers and students on their experiences, and uses anecdotal reporting to gauge the success of its programs. They have received multiple reports of students being hired full time with employers after a successful internship (either immediately after the program, or after the student completes additional education); they also note a very high percentage of employers renewing their participation each year. **I**

Resources

WorkReady Philadelphia
www.workreadyphila.com

Philadelphia Youth Network
www.pyninc.org

Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board
www.pwib.org

This article is taken from a recent issue of "K-12 Partnership Report," published by DeHavilland Associates. Educators can subscribe to this resource at www.dehavillandassociates.com/ACTE.html.



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